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# CUTO

John Torres

Didn't even remember what was the occasion but I did remember it was a way of letting off steam, better yet, anger, and as a way of immortalizing my only brother, Santiago Torres, Jr., who we all knew as Cuto and who died in vain for this country. I couldn't even begin to figure out where to look for that paper. So I figured, why not write something new about my brother, whose name still, after 20 years, hasn't joined my grandmother's on the tombstone in our family plot. I've matured a lot since then, spending 22 years as a professional musician; enduring personal pains and losses in life. *Como dicen, "Te haces maduro."*

During Loren's visit to New York, we visited my brother's grave as my mother taught us to do. She has always made sure that all grandchildren know of their uncle whom they have never met. The photographs in her bedroom are arranged so that no matter where you are standing you will see Cuto. These constant reminders have never bothered any of us, her children, since we all basically do the same, maybe not through photographs but in many other ways. As we were leaving the cemetery, Loren asked, "How did *tío* Cuto die?" I was surprised my sister had never told him, or that he had never asked any one in the family. "You don't

know?" I asked, "Well, do you want to know?" He quietly answered yes.

"In 1968; your *tío* had just arrived in Quan Tri province in Vietnam. According to what the Marines later told us, on his sixth day in country, he and four other Marines were sitting in a jeep when their camp was attacked, a mortar hit the jeep and it exploded, killing them all instantaneously." He then asked a question that has always existed in all our minds. "How do you know *tío* Cuto is in the grave, since the body parts were sealed in the casket?" I couldn't answer his question, since I remembered that the Marines had suggested we keep the casket closed to lessen the pain we were all suffering through. I didn't answer him. I continued to speak about Cuto's youth, how I, too, was scheduled to leave the week following his death for the Air Force training camp to join the Air Force Band, as my brother instructed me to do after he arrived home from boot camp with a beige manila envelope containing his orders to go for one year to fight a war in Vietnam, which historically proved to be based on a lie, a waste, a disgrace... (I could continue but anger would overcome me). He kind of knew then that he made a big mistake joining the Marines. You see, he thought if he was going to get

drafted he might as well join the best-equipped force which provided the best training and the most technically advanced weapons. Since most of our childhood friends had already started to arrive home in caskets, that was his own attempt to insure his survival, just as he had survived all those years in the neighborhood, by being the toughest. But at 19, you'd believe anything a Marine recruiter told you about the best and the toughest.

I told Loren how where we grew up in the Cypress Hills Project in Brooklyn's East New York—now a new war zone—there were so many more boys than girls, that in those days it was nothing to see 30 guys hanging out doing nothing. When the Vietnam War came to Cypress, all the guys, I stress *all* of the guys were drafted. I still don't believe it was a coincidence that they were all Black or Hispanic. In the Torres family the war would try to take both sons of Cuban/Puerto Rican parents and proud black Latinos. As Loren listened to me displaying my grief and anger, I wondered if I'd begun to teach him to dislike this country in which he and I were born. Would he be like me, non-patriotic, having a hard time standing for the Pledge of Allegiance or singing "God Bless America"? At times, I've even envied those who were born



elsewhere. I envied their patriotism for their country. How do I teach my son and nephew to be proud black Latinos and Americans if I am missing one of the foundations, Love of Country?

My family has never been the same since Cuto's death. In early 1968, my father had been released from Pilgrim State Hospital and was now working. After being sidetracked for many years during my father's absence, it seemed at last that we were on our way as a family. From his birth, Cuto was being raised to be the leader of my family. When he was killed, he left a large vacuum. Cuto had been hardened by the circumstances of life my father in institutions since we were kids, gangs, the street and by the mere fact that he was the oldest child. We were all lost when he died; my father, my mother, Mercedes and Marta, my sisters, and I were lost. July 17, 1968 that's the day my sister Mercedes, only 15 then, ran crying hysterically to our church, St. Fortunata, by herself, my mother wandered off to the bedroom to cry for her first child; till this day I don't know what Marta the youngest was doing. Within weeks, my father was sent back to Pilgrim State to be released some 15 years later, and me, I escaped into the world of music. I remember a kid I knew in Cypress asking me a week after Cuto's death why I was going off to a band rehearsal when my brother had just died? His face was full of confusion; he didn't know how I hid my pain and exuded it for 22 years as a trombone player. The death of Cuto scattered my family in different directions and only now, in 1992, can I say we're back together again, at least as close as we can be.

Even now, more than 20 years later, it's hard to tell my son Marcos why I didn't go to war. Because on that July night, America designated me as the "Sole Surviving Son," meaning that I was now the only person in my family to carry our family name. This dubious honor was given to my family with a \$10,000 check, the 1968 price for a life. It's also equally difficult to tell the grandchildren, Marcos, Loren, Jackie, Yoli, Jasmine, as well as the nephews Martin, Orlando, Owen and the new child that is growing in Julia why their grandmother's once famous *pernil* (roast pork) and other fine Latino specialties which she cooked for our family will never be the same.

*P.S. I miss you Cuto!*

Centro Journal, Center for Puerto Rican Studies



Santiago Torres "Cuto"